

The Verse of Floras: A Linguistic Journey Through Botanical Nomenclature

Poornima S V¹

¹Associate Professor of English Sir M V Government Arts & Commerce College, Newtown, Bhadravathi, Karnataka, India.

Emails: poornimaenglish@gmail.com¹

Abstract

Botanical nomenclature, the classification of specifying plants, is profoundly entwined with etymological aspects. There is a complex rapport between language and botanical nomenclature especially in Karnataka, India. It discovers the evolution of plant names showing the importance of Sanskrit, Kannada and other regional languages exposing an amusing history of cultural and historical influences. This paper unravels into the etymology of precise plant names to unearth its cavernous meaning tracing the heritages and exposing the traditional data entrenched within them. The paper also observes the influence of colonization and globalization on the nomenclature landscape, stressing the encounters confronted by dialects while reconnoitring the advent of innovative terms and the amalgamation of systematic and traditional acquaintance structures. This research underscores the significant role of sustaining and fostering the abundant history of linguistic and cultural heritage interweaved into Karnataka's vibrant floral tapestry.

Keywords: Botanical Nomenclature; Linguistics; Vernacular names; Etymology

1. Introduction

In primeval cultures abroad, floras were regularly baptized on their apparent chattels, uses or mythological connotations. These appellations were stereotypical in the vernacular language or the region. For example: the early Egyptians christened plants based on their therapeutic properties, while the Greeks frequently used eloquent terms or mythological orientations. With the advent of the Roman Empire, Latin became the lingua franca of science and scholarship. This led to the implementation of Latin as the language of botanical nomenclature. Various plant terms from this retro are derivative from Latin words or have been Latinized from Greek or other languages. In the pre-Linnaean era, plant names were often verbose and descriptive, with varying regional dialects. This lack of standardization created a tangled web of names, obstructing clear communication and classification among botanists. To illustrate, a particular species of rose described with a long, cumbersome phrase in English, such as "The English Dog Rose with prickly stems and pink flowers." A foremost turning point in botanical nomenclature originated with the work of Carl Linnaeus known as Linnaeus's Binomial system

in the 18th century, a Swedish botanist transformed plant naming with his prodigious innovation. He introduced the binomial system of nomenclature, which allocates each plant a unique two-part Latin name comprising of a genus name and a specific epithet. For example: To name the king of the fruits in Karnataka, Mango, two-part: *Mangifera Indica*. This classification provided a standardized and unambiguous way of naming plants which was a significant advancement in the field of botany. Despite the supremacy of Latin, Greek language also had a profound impact on botanical nomenclature with numerous plant genera and species names originating from Greek roots and words. To illustrate some[1-3]

1.1. *Rosa canina*

"*Rosa*" is the Latin word for rose, and "*canina*" is Latin for "dog," a concise and universally recognised scientific name, referring to the belief that dogs could use the plant for medicinal purposes.[4]

1.2. *Quercus Robur*

"*Quercus*" is the Latin word for oak, and "*Robur*" is Latin for "strength," referring to the oak tree's sturdy wood.[5-6]

1.3. *Helianthus annuus*

"*Helianthus*" is derived from the Greek words "Helios" (sun) and "Anthos" (flower), referring to the sunflower's tendency to follow the sun. This phenomenon is not restricted to foreign shores, but is equally evident in the Indian context. By delving into the historical backdrop, we can unravel the fascinating narrative of how Karnataka's plant diversity has been intricately woven into the state's linguistic and cultural heritage, revealing a rich tapestry of traditions and knowledge. In the current era, there has been a mounting drift to use more evocative and edifying botanical names. This is replicated in the cumulative use of names that denote the plant's morphology, geographic distribution or ecological significance. Moreover, there is a rising cognizance of the importance of indigenous plant names and their cultural significance. Karnataka's botanical nomenclature has an enthralling history, showcasing the state's incredible biodiversity and cultural legacy. The initial botanical terms in Karnataka were derivative from Sanskrit language (up to 600 CE) showcasing the area's unfathomable connection with Vedic and Ayurvedic cultures. Sanskrit, the venerable Indo-Aryan language has intensely inclined botanical nomenclature in Karnataka. Various Sanskrit word for floras have been derived into Indian languages particularly Kannada. Plants were termed based on their medical properties, physical attributes and mythological status. The influence of the provincial language that is Kannada with some local languages also contributed to botanical nomenclature. These names were habitually expressive and accepted through verbal ethnicities. To name some, the Sanskrit term "Nimba" (Neem) has been espoused into Kannada as "Bevu" and "Tulsi" (Holy Basil) has turned "Tulasi" illustrating the linguistic heritage shared between these ancient languages. These Sanskrit derived names usually reflect the Ayurvedic knowledge and cultural importance allied with the plants. Plants like Ashwagandha, Neem and Turmeric were commonly cited in olden manuscripts for their medicinal qualities. In the medieval period, due to the initiation of trade and commerce with conquests, Persian and Arabic languages left an ineffaceable imprint on

botanical nomenclature (600 CE to 1600 CE) Floras were christened and rechristened on the grounds of their medicinal values, culinary advantages. This multi ethnic exchange of botanical familiarity glimmered a vivacious era of nomenclatural progress. New fangled floras were presented and their terms were impeccably combined into local languages, uplifting the heights of regional botanical legacy. The European impact with the influx of the colonizers, during 1600 CE to 1947 CE, Latin and English turned out to be the essential part to botanical nomenclature especially in Karnataka. Pioneering botanist like Carl Linnaeus advanced a methodological approach in cataloguing and terming floras using Latin labels. Karnataka's breathtaking tapestry of ecosystems, unfolding from the majestic Western Ghats to the sprawling Deccan Plateau, harbours an astonishing wealth of plant diversity. This botanical paradise has beckoned botanists from far-flung corners, drawing them to explore, study, and classify the vast array of species that thrive in this vibrant landscape. The state's vegetal inheritance has been moulded by the untiring labours of regional botanists. Through their scrupulous investigation and credentials, they have significantly contributed to our understanding of Karnataka's flora, heartening the universal botanic acquaintance base. Plant names often weave in delicate threads of description, whispering secrets of their appearance, form, and essence. Like a botanical tapestry, these names reveal intricate details: the soft hue of a petal, the twisted shape of a stem, or the gentle rustle of leaves. For instance, *Rosa rubiginosa*, the rose rust, wears its name like a badge, its leaves bearing the warm, golden tones of rusty metal. These descriptive elements not only paint a vivid picture of the plant's characteristics but also hint at its hidden connections with other botanical kin, inviting us to unravel the mysteries of the plant kingdom. The names of many plants hold secrets of the past, revealing the thoughtful observations and connections made by early botanists. By studying these names, we gain a window into the minds of our botanical predecessors, who often linked plants based on their shared characteristics, such as similar appearances, growth patterns, or healing properties. These names serve as a testament to the ingenuity and

insight of early botanists, offering a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of botanical thought and classification. The names of many plants bear the watermark of original languages, affirming to the thoughtful insight and intimacy that innate cultures have cultivated with the natural world. These names exemplify a prosperity of knowledge, conveying subtle visions into the plant's real uses, revered significance, and intricate associations within the bionetwork. Like a alleged secret, these names pass down the generations, honouring the traditional perception of indigenous people to reverence the ancient bond between humans and the land.[7-10]

2. Etymology and cultural significance

The Kannada language, spoken in Karnataka, possesses a comprehensive botanical lexicon, with indigenous plant names developed over centuries through a synthesis of observational knowledge, traditional practices, and cultural associations. These vernacular designations often encapsulate valuable information regarding the plant's functional uses, ecological significance, and cultural importance. For instance The term "Honge" (*Pongamia pinnata*) references the plant's utility in traditional dye production, whereas "Dodda Patre" (*Ficus religiosa*) describes the species' distinctive large, heart-shaped leaves. This nuanced nomenclature reflects the collective expertise and experiential knowledge of local communities. The Kannada name "Agalu" (*Acacia nilotica*) is etymologically linked to the word "agalu," meaning "thorn," which pertinently defines the plant's prickly demeanour. Similarly, the name "Bevu" (neem) is rooted in the Sanskrit word "Nimba," which translates to "the giver of bliss," Azadirachta indica underlining the plant's esteemed position in Indian culture as an omen of curative and mystical welfare. The term "sandalwood" personifies a rich, aromatic bequest that spans centuries and cultures. Its etymological expedition begins with the Sanskrit word "chandana," meaning "wood for burning incense," which was hired into Arabic as "sandal." This term was later adopted into Late Greek as "sandalon," then into Medieval Latin as "sandalum," and finally into Old French as "sandal," from which the English term "sandalwood" is derived. This fascinating linguistic evolution reflects

the significant cultural and historical importance of sandalwood, particularly in traditional Indian medicine and religious rituals. For centuries, sandalwood has been cherished for its fragrant wood and essential oil, which are used to create exquisite perfumes, cosmetics, and incense. Sandalwood, a treasured and aromatic wood, is extracted from the heartwood of the majestic sandalwood tree, native to the Indian subcontinent. The revered Mysore Sandalwood stands apart for its unparalleled excellence, boasting an intoxicating fragrance, remarkable durability, and exquisite quality. Coveted for its versatility, sandalwood is a prized ingredient in the creation of exquisite perfumes, aromatic incense, and traditional handicrafts. Botanically designated as *Santalum album* by a Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778). This precise binomial nomenclature distinguishes Indian sandalwood from its counterparts, ensuring accurate identification, authentication, and commerce of this precious timber and aromatic wood, cherished for its exceptional value and allure. Turmeric, commonly known as Haldi or Arishina in Kannada, is a vibrant spice renowned for its medicinal, culinary, and cosmetic virtues. Native to India, it is abundantly cultivated in Karnataka, particularly in districts like Hassan, Mysore, and Chamarajanagar, where the ideal climate and soil conditions foster its growth. Botanically designated as *Curcuma longa* by Carl Linnaeus in 1753, turmeric has been an integral part of Indian culture, serving as a staple in cuisine, a potent ingredient in traditional medicine, and a valued component in cosmetic remedies, harnessing its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties to promote overall well-being. Ashwagandha (*Withania Somnifera*), the crown jewel of Ayurvedic herbs, owes its name to the Sanskrit words "Ashva" (horse) and "Gandha" (smell), alluding to its distinctive aroma that's believed to impart the vigour and vitality of a majestic stallion. For millennia, this revered herb has been employed to bolster stamina, energy, and longevity, earning its reputation as a potent elixir. In Hindu mythology, Ashwagandha is sacredly associated with Lord Shiva, symbolizing its profound role in fostering spiritual growth, self-realization, and inner transformation. The stately Nilgiri Tree

(*Eucalyptus globulus*) owes its name to the ancient Sanskrit language, where "Neel" alludes to the celestial blue hue and "Giri" signifies the mighty mountain ranges. Native to the Western Ghats of Karnataka, this towering tree is a treasure trove of resources, yielding valuable timber, pulpwood, and essential oil. The French botanist Jacques Labillardière (1755-1834) had the honour of christening this plant, leaving an ineffaceable mark on the realm of botany. The Tamarind Tree (*Tamarindus indica*) owes its origins to the Arabic phrase "tamr hindi", beautifully translating to "Indian Date". This majestic tree flourishes in the verdant districts of Bangalore, Mysore, and Mandya in Karnataka. Renowned for its distinctive sour-sweet pulp, the Tamarind Tree is a treasure trove of culinary and medicinal delights. The esteemed Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) had the privilege of bestowing its scientific name, forever engraving its place in the annals of botanical history. The revered Neem Tree (*Azadirachta indica*) draws its name from the ancient Sanskrit word "Nimba", signifying "bestower of good health". This majestic tree thrives in the lush districts of Bangalore, Mysore, and Hassan, Karnataka. For centuries, the Neem Tree has been cherished for its extraordinary medicinal properties, serving as a natural insecticide and a cornerstone of traditional medicine. The illustrious Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) bestowed its scientific name, cementing its status as a botanical treasure. The majestic Mango Tree (*Mangifera indica*), aptly crowned the "King of Fruits", owes its origins to the ancient Tamil word "mangai", which lovingly translates to "mango". This tropical treasure is revered for its luscious, sweet, and juicy fruit, which has been a cornerstone of Indian cuisine, medicine, and culture for centuries, symbolizing prosperity and abundance. Thriving in the fertile districts of Bangalore, Mysore, and Mandya in Karnataka, the Mango Tree's grandeur was forever immortalized by the renowned Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), who bestowed its scientific name, sealing its place in botanical history. The royal Jackfruit Tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) owes its name to the Malayalam word "chakka", affectionately referring to

this tropical treasure. Native to the lush Western Ghats of Karnataka, the Jackfruit Tree is a versatile giant, prized for its enormous edible fruit, nutritious seeds, and durable timber. The renowned Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) formally recognized this species, bestowing its scientific name and securing its place in the annals of botanical history. Delving deeper into the realm of botanical nomenclature, we uncover a treasure trove of linguistic and cultural heritage. The venerable Banyan Tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), the piquant Pepper Vine (*Piper nigrum*), and the aromatic Cardamom Plant (*Elettaria cardamomum*) are just a few examples of the fascinating etymological journeys that plant names have undertaken. Similarly, the majestic Kadamba Tree (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) holds secrets of its own, waiting to be unearthed. By exploring the intricate tapestry of plant names, we not only unravel the mysteries of their origins but also expose the rich traditional knowledge and cultural legacies that lie embedded within.[11]

Conclusion

"The Verse of Floras: A Linguistic Journey Through Botanical Nomenclature" has taken us on a captivating expedition through the fascinating realm of plant names. By deciphering the etymological codes embedded within botanical nomenclature, we have unearthed a treasure trove of linguistic, cultural, and historical significance. From the sacred Ashwagandha to the majestic Nilgiri Tree, each plant name has revealed a unique narrative, weaving together the threads of human experience, traditional knowledge, and the natural world. As we conclude this journey, we are reminded that the language of botany is not merely a system of classification, but a poetic tapestry that reflects our profound connection with the world of plants.[12]

References

- [1]. Linnaeus, C. (1753). *Species Plantarum*. Stockholm: Laurentius Salvius.
- [2]. Roxburgh, W. (1832). *Flora Indica*. London: W. Thacker & Co.
- [3]. Hooker, J.D. (1855). *Flora of British India*. London: L. Reeve & Co.
- [4]. "The Botanical Magazine". (1787-1816). London: W. Curtis.



- [5]. "Journal of the Linnean Society of London". (1856-present). London: Linnean Society of London.
- [6]. "Indian Journal of Botany". (1918-present). New Delhi: Indian Botanical Society. Online Resources:
- [7]. The Plant List (TPL). (2013). Version 1.1. Published on the Internet; (link unavailable) (accessed 2022).
- [8]. International Plant Names Index (IPNI). (2022). Published on the Internet; (accessed 2022).
- [9]. Wikipedia. (2022). List of botanical names with Sanskrit origins. Published on the Internet; (accessed 2022).
- [10]. Sanskrit Dictionary. (1899). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [11]. Tamil Lexicon. (1924-1936). Madras: University of Madras.
- [12]. Karnataka State Council for Science and Technology. (2022). Flora of Karnataka. Published on the Internet; (accessed 2022).